

Stakeholder Group Meeting 7 Summary

Date: 21 February 2024

Location: Northrepps Village Hall

Attendees Summary:

The meeting was well attended with approximately 40 members present with a variety of interests including fishermen, the Wildlife Trusts, Natural England, The Wash and North Norfolk Coast Marine Partnership, other volunteer conservation organisations and local community members.

1. Welcome

The CEO and chair of the meeting welcomed members to the meeting. Members were also reminded of the meeting etiquette.

2. Adaptive Risk Management (ARM)

An overview was given to the group of Adaptive Risk Management (ARM). This included the timeline of events which led to ARM, how risk was identified and why ARM was chosen as the appropriate management. ARM is intended to be participatory, flexible and informed which is demonstrated through the various groups formed and set up to allow a flow of information, feedback and suggestions between the different groups.

An update on the progress against the ARM plan was given. Which informed stakeholders of the current progression of the ARM plan including the key milestone reached and the research involved.

3. Natural Disturbance Study Update

An overview and update was given on the Natural Disturbance Study. The Primary aim of the study is to inform the adaptive risk management process of the impact of potting activity on rugged chalk features in relation to natural disturbance by closing areas to potting activity, quantifying change to the structure of chalk features and compare rates of degradation. The methodology was explained including a rationale for each stage. The Experimental design has been chosen with 6 Experimental areas (3 Open (Open to potting) and 3 Closed (Closed to potting)) and all other variables consistent between sites. The survey methods include high resolution multibeam data, 3D photogrammetry feature mapping, impact assessment, micro and macro diversity surveys, weather/tide data and fishing activity monitoring.

The study is currently at a stage where coordinates and plotters have been provided to fishers, survey methods have been trialed, licenses for marker buoys have been received and monitoring of the closed areas is ongoing. The next steps in the project are to secure funding and publish the project plan, deploy marker buoys, complete multibeam surveys and plan summer surveys, monitoring will also continue during this time.

Key discussion points

- **Evidence gaps:** The general consensus around the Natural Disturbance Study was concern that there was insufficient evidence to address the studies aims. This overarching discussion on the how effective this method will be at providing enough evidence stemmed from a concern about the robustness of the study design.
- **Study Design:** Particular points included concern of the low frequency of the intended dive surveys throughout the study, creating a feeling that data will not be adequate for the study to be robust enough to be able to detect attribution of damage from pots.
- **Measuring Anthropogenic factors:** Following on, a number of stakeholders also noted that the study would have risk of attributing damage from other anthropogenic damage to potting activities. Factors such as flotsam and jetsam, sea defence debris and other active vessels anchoring, which in both the closed and open area will not be uniform. Thus, creating concern that measuring and monitoring anthropogenic damage to chalk and attributing it to potting impacts will be problematic.

4.Phase 1 permit Conditions Consultation

In order to inform the future management of the Cromer Shoal Chalk Beds MCZ, a workshop was conducted to foster discussion and gather responses to the phase 1 permit condition consultation (opened at the meeting). An overview of the consultation was provided, followed by facilitated group discussion. Stakeholders were allowed to form groups themselves, and a scribe and facilitator were allocated to each table to foster and capture discussion amongst the groups. The workshop was structured to enable constructive discussion around two permit conditions:

1. Inshore Vessel Size Restriction Permit
2. Seasonal Closure Permit.

Key Discussion points

During the discussion of the proposed permit conditions many points were raised regarding the overall view to the proposal of permits. Many felt that the permits will have a devastating effect on this fishery with the already substantial list of administrative tasks and enforced costs from existing measures will only be made worse by new measures further discouraging and hindering new boats and young fishers to enter the fishery and risking the collapse of the fishery in the future.

Additionally, there were concerns that these measures will not go far enough to protect the chalk features, with some uncertainty in the evidence used to support the proposed measures.

Inshore Vessel Restriction

This proposed permit condition is an Inshore Vessel Restriction Size which will prohibit the use of vessels fishing using pots within 3 nautical miles (inside the

MCZ) unless the vessel is less than 10m in length or was 'beach launched' for that trip.

Key Discussion:

Vessel Size impacts: There was general agreement that the inshore vessel restriction would reduce impacts to the rugged chalk site; by reducing the risk of sizeable vessels, (including vivier boats from larger ports such as Grimsby and Bridlington which are known to have the ability to carry higher numbers of pots), from entering the area. There was a perception in the group that larger vessels have historically "decimated" whelk grounds and it was agreed this measure will avoid similar occurring to the crab fishery. However some felt that the exemption for under 10m vessels would lead to an exploitation of the restriction; with smaller vessels increasing their size to the limit, which creates the risk of reducing the desired effect of the permit condition. There was some consensus from the group that the under 10m exemption should be removed.

- **Effectiveness of permit:** During discussion there were differences in opinion regarding the level of effect this would have. Some believed that few/no current fishers would be excluded from the area as a result of the measure and therefore would not restrict effort and the risks associated. Some were concerned that without enough evidence of the number of vessels above 10m/beached launched it would be impossible to predict how the inshore vessel restriction will have the intended effect. Finally, some voiced a fear that this permit would have damaging consequences to vessels present in the area which are greater than 10m and cannot be beach launch. With the disparity in views there was no consensus reached on this particular topic of the permit condition.
- **Alternative management:** Finally a number of questions were raised regarding the reason for the chosen restriction. With little evidence of the size and beach launched vessels in the area, why not focus on other restrictions such as pot limitation, gear limitations or hauling technique?

Seasonal Closure

The second proposed permit condition is a 'winter' closure, during January and February across the rugged chalk area. This proposed measure was based on the risk analysis which identifies that the highest risk months are January and February. This proposed measure is designed to reduce the risk to the rugged chalk, hence the management area defined as the most recent rugged chalk extent area.

Key discussion points

- **Impacts on fishing:** It was raised that although the time period coincides with a natural drop in fishing effort this measure would undoubtedly impact the fishing industry; creating a displacement of effort rather than reducing effort and, consequently, increasing effort in open areas or during open periods

potentially increasing risk to the chalk and negatively impacting the value of the fishery as overhead costs during the closure period would still be needing to be maintained by both fishermen and processors. Further, it was raised that there is little room for diversification in the fishery to make up these costs. The closure may also negatively impact other fisheries such as the fishery whelk, particularly if it coincided with a poor crab and lobster season.

- **Weather and climate change uncertainty:** The unpredictability of the weather and the threat of climate change unsurprisingly caused additional concern throughout the whole group, with fishing activity and movement of crabs already heavily dependent on weather. Although many agree that winter, is when 'bad weather' and storms generally occur and because, anecdotally, pots left during winter (during bad weather and storms) cause greater damage a closure would help protect the rugged chalk. A view that there was insufficient evidence and weather data created concern. Firstly, the evidence intended to guide this permit was not enough coupled with concern the figures were inconsistent with the consultation material, this also was put alongside the observation that it appears the bad weather and storms actually occurred in March, April and May. Some also pointed concern to the fact that weather conditions should also include tides as this significantly impacts pot movement together with tides. The uncertainties climate change brings for the movement of crabs also gained significant discussion as the effects of sea temperature rises are unknown. If sea temperature increases crabs will become 'active' at different times of the year therefore shifting the 'crab' season which will ultimately change the 'high risk' months.

Coupled with the unpredictability of weather and risk of uncertainty created by climate change there was significant agreement in the group that the closure should be flexible and reactive rather than a fixed period. Two new proposals were shared and discussed within the groups: a short notice period that would react to predicted weather conditions or an addition to the existing permit of a dispensation if the weather is calmer for that particular year, with the addition of this being continually reviewed.

- **Lost gear:** Some of the group felt that this proposed measure did not go far enough to reduce the risk as although the closure guarantees no fishing for 2 months, the 'lost gear' which is left in during those months will still pose a threat to the chalk. Particularly given that lost gear is thought to be more damaging than active gear. Therefore, the group discussed that all lost gear should be removed before this management comes into effect. However, some disagreed stating that fishers already bring their gear in before the bad weather period as they don't want their gear damaged.
- **Soak time:** Soak time was discussed greatly throughout the groups which evidenced the differences in opinion throughout the groups. Some identified soak time as an important factor to be considered and should be limited to two

days on the upper limit and potentially enforced all year round. However, it was also identified that this was dependent on the weather and that there are risks involved with enforcing specific soak times with some disagreeing with the consideration all together.

- **Rugged chalk extent:** Finally, significant discussion throughout the groups provided evidence of the lack of faith in the area designated for closure during the proposed season. Firstly with a large majority of data to still be considered there was agreement that the area was not of sufficient accuracy both to protect the chalk and avoid creating unnecessary impact on the fishery. Many argued that the area was too much of a blanket closure as the impact of weather on pot movement is area dependant and some closed areas have significantly higher quality of crabs and are believed to be 'safe' which will ultimately affect the value of the crabs. Discussion around the uncertainty and the accuracy of the extent of the proposed closed area was also demonstrated though annotation of the map amongst groups.

5. Gear Recovery

This item was removed prior to the meeting and postponed until the next stakeholder group meeting.

6. Stakeholder Group Review

An update on the departure of the Marine Conservation Society Agents of the Change Project from the group was provided. It was explained that they were no longer able to be involved in ARM and hold the chair position of the Stakeholder Group due to a recent restructure and resource and capacity constraints.

An overview of the revised communication and engagement strategy was provided. This included the addition of a plan which sets out the frequency and timescales of committed meetings and updates to be adhered to. Feedback on this was then sought from the group.

Key discussion points:

- **Engagement Strategy Update:** There was general agreement for a new engagement and communications strategy and plan. Stakeholders agreed that a review was welcomed and an increase in outward facing communication in the form of a quarterly update was also welcomed, originating from a feeling of disenfranchisement. A number of stakeholders expressed their interest in understanding the current work going on and the progress of the ARM plan.
- **Stakeholder Group Chair:** Following the very recent and unexpected departure of the Marine Conservation Society there was some expression that it would be welcomed if Eastern IFCA were to take the reins of the group rather than an external body, this was not a consensus, and some felt an independent chair would be more appropriate moving forward.

- **Meeting dates:** Generally, the group agreed that a commitment to two stakeholder group meetings a year would be sufficient and agreed that a minimum of two stakeholder group meetings a year would not be the limit. Discussion ensued throughout the group which brought to light that although the intended dates were suitable, that an in-person meeting in Q1 (proposed February) would be more productive with a greater number of topics to update on. The second online meeting later in the year should be subsequent to summer, again with a feeling that this would be more productive and allow updates on the summer surveys. These dates were agreed with the whole group.
- **Meeting Structure:** In addition to the proposed new dates, the group were mostly in agreement that a face-to-face meeting was preferred. Although the second meeting was intended to provide more flexibility being online, it was evident a number of stakeholders were concerned that online meetings were difficult to access.

7. Round up

Finally, a summary of the key take home points were discussed and summarised. The group was thanked for attending.